

Australian Imams: The Way Forward

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Discussion

We are truly blessed to be living in Australia. The freedom of speech, politics and religion that we experience in Australia is afforded to a small few in the world and we must thank Allah (God) for this.

Some of us came from war torn countries to lead a better life here but the Australian society that we aspire to is one which is inclusive, diverse, harmonious, and tolerant, where all people regardless of race, colour, religion or background have an equal opportunity. We recognise and respect differences in our community. We are one community, under Allah in Australia with justice and dignity for all.

We Australians are a free people but we must accept that freedom and liberty carries with it the need for tolerance, the respect for others, wisdom, restraint and responsibility, where the adherence to the Rule of Law is the paramount consideration.

The Non Muslim community members that our organisation has fielded queries from are generally ill informed and inquisitive about Islam and Muslims. Those that we are able to reach and teach are achieving understanding, relief and fulfilment. Understanding in the sense of sharing the same common godly goals. Relief in the sense of clarifying the various misconceptions cooked up by media, politicians or other antagonists.

Fulfilment in the sense of having overcome the misconceived and ill-informed stance they held prior to the enquiry.

In some cases, more is required and that's when our Imams and Daa'at s (preachers) are getting involved. Such a dearth in sufficient understandable English information (or at least persons sufficiently competent enough to explain the available information in English and in accordance to mainstream Muslim perspectives) is leading to stress and anxiety, which in turn is metamorphing into impatience bitterness and hatred towards Muslims. As a result, we have become the new communism (particularly in the West) and some people in our community are so repulsed by our actions, it is making life unbearable for us and our offspring.

Not all Non Muslims want to attack us and the vast majority of non Muslims understand and empathise with our issues. Some Muslims however are not helping and they are ruining it for the rest of us. They are giving non Muslims ammunition to hate us because a few of them are simply not doing or saying the right things. This small minority is then usually fished out as being the epitome and representative of all Muslims. So the bad apple ruins it for the whole.

In this world of uncertainty for both Muslims and Non Muslims, we are pioneers and Imams have a huge responsibility. Imams are today burdened with the obligation to be cautious for care must be taken with everything they say or do. The privilege of influence carries with it the responsibility of the consequence. Every shepherd is responsible for his flock.

Don't be fooled. We are not a backward race or religion. Muslims are building bridges and we are uniting future generations of Australians, whether Muslims or Non Muslims. We and our religion however are misunderstood. Not only because we are not good communicators but because we often don't practice what we preach. The non Muslim community has simply had enough of us. Only when we mend our ways and we respect our fellow country people can we demand tolerance and forbearance.

Recently certain Imams (Clerics) created a stir around the world by making comments in the media without regard for the wider community. Such provocation does nothing more than to further isolate the Muslim community from the rest of Australia. Such isolation has a massive follow on effect on our people, businesses and schools with the following occurring quite frequently:

1. Muslim staff members laid off from work without excuse;
2. Our fragile woman folk are being attacked in broad daylight;
3. People opting not to purchase or use the services of Muslims;
4. School kids being bullied and taunted by non Muslim students;
5. Muslim people are being discriminated against in favour of Non Muslims whether in the workforce, in school or even professional sports;
6. Muslim garbed brothers and sisters being spat on from moving vehicles;

7. Muslims being treated as second rate citizens with basic services being denied;
8. A massive inclination by Muslims to use drugs, alcohol and commit suicide particularly among teenage boys.

There are many more incidents to mention and it is little wonder that many Muslims are angry and have turned to drugs, alcohol and even contemplated suicide.

The last thing this society wants is angry men and women following radical but charismatic cult like figures who promote breaches of the law and violence on the preposterous justification that they are simply acting in self defence in a time of war.

We are not at war and we need some of our Imams to stop being negligent.

Many Imams believe that the more controversy surrounding Islamic issues, the greater the effects to Islamic propagation. They argue that the more confusion the Muslim community creates, the more curious we seem and the more interest is created. The writer does not subscribe to this notion and believes that all this serves to achieve is more embarrassment.

The duty of an Imam is not only to teach, spread the word of Islam or to unite the Muslim people of Australia, but to set an example of Islam in practice: that of course is the ultimate act of Daa'wah (propagation).

Imams can get involved and contribute towards Australian specific activities. For example, it would be great to see a Turbaned Imam fighting fires alongside other Bush Fire Service volunteers. Organizations like the Surf Life Saving Association, Clean UP Australia day initiative, Emergency Services and any other worthwhile cause should be joined as a matter of course by the Imam and his followers. We are all here for one another. This is our religion. This is our country. Let's make it the best country in the world.

As Imams have an audience, it is they who have the greatest potential to help us through these times, revive Islam as the great religion of peace and counter the negative stereotype attributed to Islam.

As we Muslims live in a time where we are constantly under the microscope, we have to excel at everything we do. It is our Islamic obligation to continue to work hard and strive to the best of our abilities. It is also our duty to continue to contribute and make Australia the best country to live. If we don't, it's up to the Imams to follow us up on such duties. The Prophet (saw) enjoined upon us as Muslims to be proficient in all our endeavours.

Imams must themselves practice introspection where they must reflect on their own personal actions as well as those of their followers. They must ask their followers how they can be better Australian Muslims. They need not concern themselves with the wider community before they correct their own ways.

Remember: being a Muslim means you are the best example in society and living up to the superior morality of the prophet (saw). It is thus a duty upon every Imam to contribute to Australia and make Australia a better country to live in. Australia is our country as much as it is anyone else's. Lets stop sulking and crying that we are the oppressed community. Travel the world and witness how lucky we really are as Australian Muslims.

Imams must condemn any violent action against property or person whether the perpetrator is Muslim or otherwise and request that we all be patient and not lose hope in the Rule of Law.

We have problems and those problems need to be addressed and resolved by us with the help of our Imams. Our Imams must insist that their followers are law abiding citizens, tolerant, well mannered, just, fair, giving, humble, peaceful and even well groomed. Imams must uphold the Muslim identity as exemplified by the prophet; Honesty, integrity, forgiveness, charity, neighbourly love, righteousness, courage, sympathy, love are all characteristics of the Muslim that we should be. Let Imams show the world what it truly means to be a Muslim. These values and ideals are Islamic and Australian. These are universal values embodied and supported by all Imams of understanding. The whole world is crying for information about Islam and what it is like to be a true Muslim. So let our Imams live up to this honourable responsibility and show their true Islamic character.

Imams have a duty to the wider community to live up to their duties as citizens of this country. Imams must remain calm, patient and in control. Imams must not attack one another. Imams must not hate one another. Imams are all leaders. Imams all have a duty to those that depend on them. Imams are all brothers must love one another sincerely and with no thought of personal interest and without hatred, envy, jealousy for one another. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said "A believer loves for others what he loves for himself". These are the teachings of Islam and the prophet (saw).

If Imams are dutiful, obey Allah and his prophets, and live up to his teachings, then and only then will we be seen to be true Muslims and therefore true Australians. Remember, being a good Muslim means that you are also a law abiding and community conscious citizen. There is no difference.

Remember: The most perfect believer in faith is one who is the best in good conduct. The question must be asked: Are we really acting in accordance with the teachings of Islam, the Koran and those of the prophet Mohamed (saw). It's the Imams of our community whose responsibility it is to make sure that their congregation is acting in accordance with the true teachings of Islam.

Imams must show the world that Muslims can practice the religion and worship their creator here in Australia in harmony with non Muslims without offending them, breaking the law, prejudicing the rights of others or resorting to violence. After all, Islam teaches us to live by the laws of the state in which you reside.

Let me be very clear. If an Imam finds it impossible to comply with the laws of this country (and justifies its breach), then they should leave Australia altogether for such ignorance is tarnishing the prophet's religion and superior morality.

We want to thank the Imams of our community for the tireless and thankless work they do. They are essential ingredients in portraying the message. May Allah (swt) reward them for their efforts and may Allah (swt) bless every action or decision they make for and on behalf the community.

We hope that the foregoing recommendations will be accepted and a debate will be initiated as to how our Imams can better serve our community.

Like you the writer wants to live up to these principles and return the image of Islam to that of its heydays where Islam flourished through peace and not through force. We must not lose the faith in the prophets (saw) ultimate message: Peace!

Peace be upon you, your family and our fellow Australians.

Recommendations

The writer makes the following non exhaustive recommendations:

1. The immediate formation of a national council of the entirety of the Imams (“Clerics”) now practicing in Australia;
2. The Mufti of Australia would be elected from amongst the constituency of the council;
3. A board of national executives would be elected from amongst the members of the council for the purposes of exercising the decision making process;
4. The board on behalf of the council, is to:
 - 4.1. be responsible for providing accreditation services for any prospective Imams;
 - 4.2. to be responsible for the affairs of the Muslim community in Australia particularly from the perspective of an Imam;
 - 4.3. to be a Islamic source of reference for the Muslim community of Australia;
 - 4.4. to cooperate with all the Muslim scholars in Australia;
 - 4.5. to establish an Islamic fatwa council with the coordination of the Mufti;
 - 4.6. to work towards uniting the Islamic opinions of the Muslim scholars and Imams of Australia;

- 4.7. establish Islamic solutions in regards to family law and social matters in Australia;
- 4.8. establish a religious social reference that solves family disputes;
- 4.9. achieve a convention pledging brotherhood;
- 4.10. facilitate the releasing of a united agreement that covers the needs of the Muslim Community in Australia and attempts to solve their issues and assist in their dealings with other communities from different faiths in Australia;
- 4.11. present the true image of Islam in respect of its tolerance, justice and its high morals, particularly in relation to its dealings with non-Muslims;
- 4.12. manage the Islamic media to clarify the concepts of Islam in accordance with moderate and mainstream Islamic ideology;
- 4.13. establish an Islamic website for fatwa's lessons Khutab and lectures;
- 4.14. establish a committee (calling for the good) to resolve conflict and the dispute in the Islamic associations, organisations or between the Muslim community;
- 4.15. hold regular Islamic Knowledge conferences and inviting scholars to it and introducing the principles and clarifying the concepts of Islam;
- 4.16. hold regular conferences and dialogues that relate to the Muslim youth and the Muslim woman and to get them involved and active in society;

- 4.17. set a strategic plan for the establishment of an Islamic institute that will educate and certify Imams and Dua'ats (preachers);
- 4.18. issue accreditation to prospective Imams, without which an imam is not able to practice;
- 4.19. have the power to revoke the accreditation on serious acts of misconduct;
- 4.20. have the powers to audit the activities of an Imam;
- 4.21. work towards the separation of state and religion;
5. Before an application for accreditation can be considered, the prospective Imam must demonstrate that they:
 - 5.1. are a citizen of Australia or a permanent resident;
 - 5.2. have an Islamic studies certificate or Degree from a recognized Islamic Tertiary institution;
 - 5.3. are active in the community and constantly attending to Godly work;
 - 5.4. have an average command of the English language;
 - 5.5. are a person of good fame and character;
 - 5.6. are a person without an Australian or overseas criminal record;
 - 5.7. are a person not having links or past membership to organizations of suspicion;
 - 5.8. have not been a member, associate, supporter or in any way a contributor of a political party in Australia or abroad.
 - 5.9. are not known to have any deviant or odd ideology as opposed to the moderate and mainstream Islamic ideology;

6. In fulfilling their role of an imam, members of the council must:
 - 6.1. be sincere in their devotion to Allah (God), observing him in secrecy and in the open;
 - 6.2. have the best of Islamic characters and morals;
 - 6.3. Constantly develop and maintain their Islamic knowledge and skill base;
 - 6.4. respect the members of the council especially in the public;
 - 6.5. not criticise any of the members especially in the public;
 - 6.6. not to use the council for personal gain;
 - 6.7. not to speak on behalf of the council without the Boards approval;
 - 6.8. not to use the goodwill of the council for any personal gain or benefit;
 - 6.9. respect the etiquette of Islamic meetings;
 - 6.10. communicate clearly with the community (both in English and Arabic);
 - 6.11. undertake a certain amount of English training (as determined by the council from time to time) in order to be rewarded with yearly accreditation;
 - 6.12. comply with the normal requirements set out by the various government departments in respect of the running of the business of an Imam if not employed by an organisation;
 - 6.13. full, updated and complete accounting records must be kept in respect of the business of an Imam;

- 6.14. to remain apolitical and should not openly support any political party or candidate;
- 6.15. declare all gifts;
- 6.16. not communicate with the media except through the spokespersons of their employer, their representative or the Council;
- 6.17. to the fullest extent uphold and promote the rule of law;
- 6.18. not in any way shape or form derogate from the full compliance of the laws of Australia;
- 6.19. not justify the breaking of the laws of Australia;
- 6.20. re-affirm its allegiance to the Nation of Australia, its symbols and insignia;
- 6.21. become a member of an emergency organisation (and promote same) in their locality such as the Bush Fire Service, Surf Life Saving, or any other emergency services provider;
- 6.22. forbid, denounce and condemn any act of violence against any person or property;
- 6.23. do all things necessary to prevent any radicalisation or the breeding of fanatical opinions;
- 6.24. conduct themselves in a manner consistent with Australian values;
- 6.25. commit to answering questions from non Muslims for several hours per week (eg on Talk Back Radio);
- 6.26. commit to teaching Islam to Muslims and non Muslims;
- 6.27. screen what they preach to make sure it is not offensive prejudicial or even illegal;
- 6.28. work towards eradicating racism and discrimination in society

- 6.29. live by the notions of peace, harmony, fairness, justice for all, equality in a nation free from discrimination and prejudice particularly towards other faiths and creeds;
- 6.30. conduct affairs in a peaceful manner
- 6.31. keep the affairs of the individual seeking assistance from them completely private;
- 6.32. have the best manners and most superior morality;
- 6.33. practice high levels of ethics in all their dealings
- 6.34. be the epitome of the Muslim individual;
- 6.35. not bring the problems experienced overseas to Australia;
- 6.36. understand and accept that violence creates problems rather than solves them;
- 6.37. not be fooled that this country belongs to Muslims at the exclusion of others;
- 6.38. leave politics to politicians;
- 6.39. not criticise other races and religions;
- 6.40. exercise self restraint particularly when the subject matter could be explosive;
- 6.41. not abuse the privilege of freedom of speech;
- 6.42. work towards a model of the Muslim community living in peace and harmony among non Muslims for the entire world to follow;
- 6.43. work towards solving the interest free dilemma for Muslim mortgages by researching alternative forms of finance;
- 6.44. work with Islamic enterprises to promote business success;
- 6.45. work with families to solve disputes;

- 6.46. take on the role of a mentor for teenagers to:
 - 6.46.1. tackle the formation of gangs or cults;
 - 6.46.2. teach youngsters moderate and mainstream Islam (as opposed to radical ideologies);
 - 6.46.3. tackle the problem of youth suicide;
 - 6.46.4. give teenagers the correct interpretation of the Koran;
 - 6.46.5. help with any identity issues;
 - 6.46.6. help with any discrimination issues;
 - 6.46.7. get children involved and keep them off the street;
 - 6.46.8. tackle drug, sex, violence and alcohol issues using religion and the message of peace;
 - 6.46.9. rid the possible angst, or even hatred towards non Muslims;
 - 6.46.10. be a networking or referral medium to assist with business jobs or apprenticeships;
 - 6.46.11. help build character and leadership through involving teenagers with various events and projects;
 - 6.46.12. give advice and feedback;
 - 6.46.13. help build body mind and soul through sport, education and prayer;